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DEPT FOR WHA/CEN - ROIS BEAL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [BH](#)

SUBJECT: BELIZE: PARTY LEADER IS AN ELECTION UPSET FOR THE PUP OLD
GUARD

REF: Belmopan 172

¶1. (U) On March 30, the People's United Party (PUP) held a convention in the nation's capital to determine the party's new leader. Initially, three candidates were vying for the top position: Johnny Briceno, Mark Espot, and Francis Fonseca. Espot and Briceno withdrew from the election several weeks ago claiming the poll was unfair and fixed in favor of Francis Fonseca, as the heir apparent to the former party leader Said Musa (reftel). However, less than a week prior to the convention, Briceno rejoined the race to contend for the party leader position. According to Briceno, he rejoined due to overwhelming popular demand due in part to a reaction to a heavy-handed attempt by the old guard to expel Espot from the party..

¶2. (U) Over six hundred delegates from the PUP gathered at the Belmopan Civic Centre to elect a new leader. In what was reported by both candidates as a generally fair and orderly electoral process, Johnny Briceno won the election by 20 votes. (Note: Briceno's biography to follow septel. End Note.) Briceno, who supports dramatic changes within the party, was viewed by many as an underdog in this race because of the strong public support his opponent received from former Prime Minister Said Musa and his close party cronies Ralph Fonseca and former Prime Minister and party leader emeritus, George Price.

Comment

¶3. (SBU) Though Briceno's track record as a politician is not unblemished, many see his election to party leader as a positive step for the PUP as it tries to rebuild. The convention results indicate a further break in the PUP old guard's stranglehold on the party and the public. Fonseca pledged to provide his support to the newly elected party leader. However, we question whether his allegiance to his party cronies will take precedence over his loyalty to the party. The only six PUP area representatives remain equally divided among supporters of the old regime (Fonseca, Godfrey Smith and Florencio Marin, Jr.) and Briceno, Espot and Cordell Hyde, who argued that the party needed to heed the electorate's message in the national election. The opposing mindsets and attitudes of both groups suggest that Musa and company are still unwilling to take a back seat to new leadership. Briceno will have his hands full convincing the old guard to accept its diminished role as he seeks to build popular support in order for the party to recapture some of its former strength. End Comment.

DIETER